



## **FACT SHEET – Grandfather Mountain Acquisition**

### **N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation**

*September 29, 2008*

The agreement announced Sept. 29, 2008 by Gov. Mike Easley for the State of North Carolina to purchase 2,601 acres on Grandfather Mountain will lead to the creation of North Carolina's newest state park at one of the state's premier landmarks. And, it follows within a year the acquisition of Chimney Rock, another icon in the western North Carolina landscape. Both acquisitions arose from negotiations with leading families in the state's tourism industry – Todd and Lucius Morse in the case of Chimney Rock, and the heirs of Hugh Morton at Grandfather Mountain.

### **The Agreement**

The state parks system will acquire the 2,601-acre undeveloped portion of the private nature park from Grandfather Mountain Inc., property sometimes referred to as the "backcountry," with current access limited to a network of foot trails. The property lies in Avery, Watauga and Caldwell counties. The purchase price is \$12 million.

The state will also acquire an easement on the remaining 604 acres where Grandfather Mountain Inc. facilities are located including a nature center, seven wildlife habitats and the park's signature swinging bridge. The easement limits development on this property yet will allow events such as the Highland Games to continue. The easement gives the state right of first refusal should Grandfather Mountain Inc. decide to sell this property.

The Morton family's intent is to use funds from the sale to establish a nonprofit entity to continue operating visitor facilities on the 604-acre parcel.

Mike Leonard, vice chairman of the board of trustees of The Conservation Fund, acted as intermediary in the negotiation of the agreement. The Conservation Fund has secured a contract to acquire the property and the easement and will work with the state to complete the acquisition once funding is set aside.

The Nature Conservancy was also involved in the negotiation. The Nature Conservancy holds easements on portions of Grandfather Mountain and it owns some adjacent properties.

The N.C. Parks and Recreation Trust Fund and the Natural Heritage Trust Fund – both supported by the state's tax on real estate deed transfers – will be asked to provide funding for the purchase.

No closing date has been established.

## **Why It's Important**

Grandfather Mountain, with its 5,946-foot Calloway peak, diversity of habitats and rare species and its scenic beauty, make it an important addition to the state's conservation lands to be protected in perpetuity.

The mountain supports 16 distinct ecological communities. The most notable is the red spruce-Fraser fir forest, and the list also includes a heath bald, high-elevation red oak forest, rich cove forest, Canada hemlock forest and spray cliff. A total 73 rare species have been identified on the mountain. Of these, 32 are federally or state listed as imperiled. Species include the spruce fir moss spider, Blue Ridge goldenrod, the bog turtle, the eastern small-footed bat, and the Carolina northern flying squirrel.

The mountain contains the headwaters of both the Linville and Watauga rivers and has been the only private park designated by the United Nations as an International Biosphere Reserve.

Grandfather Mountain is also an important component of a much larger network of conservation lands. Adjacent and nearby properties include the Blue Ridge Parkway, the Pisgah National Forest and holdings by The Nature Conservancy. It is in a critical position to maintain intact habitat areas and wildlife corridors.

The state parks system has other units important for conservation in the region including Elk Knob State Park in Watauga and Ashe counties, New River State Park in Ashe County, Lake James State Park in Burke County, Mountain Bogs State Natural Areas in Avery County, and newly authorized state natural areas at Yellow Mountain (on the Mitchell-Avery county line) and Bear Paw (just north of the Town of Seven Devils).

## **State Park Development**

The 2009 General Assembly will be asked to formally authorize a state park at Grandfather Mountain. This will allow the state parks system to take possession of the Grandfather Mountain property and dedicate it to that authorized unit. It is also a necessary step for any additional land acquisition.

Following that, a master planning effort will be launched for the new state park at Grandfather Mountain. A state park master plan is a guide for long-term resource protection and facility development. The system recently completed master plans for Gorges and South Mountains state parks and plans for Chimney Rock, Carvers Creek and Haw River will soon be prepared. Any additional tracts or facilities at Grandfather

Mountain would be identified and prescribed through this master planning process, which includes opportunities for public input.

## **Growth of the State Parks System**

The state parks system is in a growth phase, largely due to the existence of the state's conservation trust funds, an active network of conservancies and land trusts and good acquisition opportunities.

In 2001, the division launched its *New Parks for a New Century* initiative, an effort to identify potential locations for new state parks and state natural areas in order to better serve a growing population and to fulfill its mission to protect representative examples of the state's natural heritage.

Since that time, five new parks have been authorized and are under development – Chimney Rock in Rutherford County, Mayo River and Haw River, both in Rockingham County, Carvers Creek in Cumberland County and Elk Knob in Watauga and Ashe County (which began as a state natural area). Mayo River and Carvers Creek state parks are not yet open to the public. Also last year, Dismal Swamp State Park, formerly a state natural area, was given state park status, and opened to the public.

There are 33 authorized state parks and four state natural areas. The division manages 202,933 acres as state parks, recreation areas, natural areas and trails. In 2007, the state parks system recorded its all-time high visitation of 13.4 million.